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“I am not waiting for money. I just want vindication and a basic apology”. Policies of “rehabilitation” of the Pomaks from Blagoevgrad region after the fall of the communist regime

Abstract: In 1991, Bulgaria adopted the Law on Civil and Political Rehabilitation of Persons Repressed under Communism. The law came into force only in 1993 and continued until 1996. The article critically analyses the law and points out its undemocratic character in relation to the Pomaks, victims of the violent assimilation, the so called “revival” process. The Ordinance to the Law puts the victims in the position of seeking proof of innocence from the same repressive authorities that persecuted and killed them. The approved, but mostly rejected Decisions of the Municipal, District and Central Commissions, are analyzed and kept in the State Archive – Blagoevgrad (SAB) and Central State Archive – Sofia (CSA). The article traces the tendency of the Commissions to reject applications for rehabilitation of Pomaks, affected by the worst cases of murder and imprisonment during the name change.

Keywords: Pomaks; Bulgaria; law; political and civil rehabilitation; criminalisation; repression; circumcision

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On June 5, 1991, the Grand National Assembly adopted the Political and Civil Rehabilitation of Repressed Persons Act /PCRRPA/¹ – promulgated in the State Gazette, No. 50 of 25 June 1991 which declared the rehabilitation of persons “*unlawfully repressed because of their origin, political convictions or religious beliefs between 12 September 1944 and 10 November 1989*”. 28 June 1994, the date of the initial effect of the law was changed from 12 September to 9 September. This Law is extremely important because it should restore a criminal injustice of the totalitarian communist regime.

Decree No. 49 of 09.12.1992 of the Council of Ministers adopted the Ordinance on the Implementation of the Act, which established the Central, Regional and Municipal Commissions by settlements. The Commissions were to consist of five members: 1. Chairman – the mayor of the municipality; 2. A representative of the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Interior; 3. Secretary; and two members – representatives of the Union of the Repressed. It was the duty of the Local Committees to determine the grounds, nature and duration of the repression and to determine the amount of compensation for the repression suffered.

By Decision No.1 of 13.05.1993, the Central Commission determined the composition of the Regional and Municipal Commissions and they began to operate in reality. That is to say, the Act became effective almost 2 years after it was officially promulgated in the Official Gazette. The Act and its Ordinance provided that the decisions of the Municipal Commissions were to be appealed to the Regional Commission and its decisions to the Central Commission. No provision was made for judicial appeals. The Act also fixed the final date of its operation – 31 December 1996, when the activity of the Commissions ended. All the examined documents of repressed persons were handed over for storage in the local state archives, as well as in the Central State Archives /CSA/ in Sofia. In 2004, at the insistence of the organizations of the repressed in Bulgaria, the Commissions resumed their activities, and the Act was repeatedly amended. On 31.12.2011, the last period of limitation of the Act expired².

¹ For the sake of simplicity, we will only use the term *the Act* in the text.

² The documents from this period have not been submitted to the CSA.

The object of this research are the archival documents of the Municipal and Regional Commissions of Blagoevgrad region – the State Archive in Blagoevgrad /f. 1511/ and the documents of the Central Commission in Sofia – CSA / f. 1206, op. 1/.

The objectives we have set in the study include:

- On the basis of the submitted documents for the period from 1993 to 1996, to analyze the cases of unrecognized political rehabilitation and use them to highlight the gaps in the Act, its Ordinance and other laws and regulations related to repression under communism.
- To emphasize the repression of the Pomaks in the Blagoevgrad region as double victims – once as part of all the repressed in Bulgaria and as a marginal religious group subjected to the totalitarian policy of state assimilation.
- To critically analyse the 1991 PCRRPA by identifying the groups of repressed who have been denied political rehabilitation.

1. Who are the Pomaks in Bulgaria?

Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks)³ are a distinct community in Bulgaria. There are Muslims speaking Slavic languages in four other countries: Turkey, Greece, Macedonia and Albania.

Mihail Ivanov's article "*The Pomaks, according to Bulgarian ethno-demographic statistics*" traces how the statistics reflect the identities of the Pomaks from the Ottoman Empire to modern times. According to the author, "In the first years after September 9, 1944, when power was seized by the Communist-dominated Fatherland Front, there were hesitations about how to call the Pomaks. In the speeches of representatives of the ruling elite, party functionaries and public figures, as well as in official documents, one can find different variants: Pomaks, Mohammedans, Pomaks-Mohammedans, Pomaks-Muslims, Bulgarian-Mohammedans, Macedonians-Mohammedans /Pomaks/. Towards the end of the 1940s, the name "Bulgarian-Mohammedans" was gradually established, "which was a part of the enduring political and ideological tendency to 'Bulgarianize' this population"⁴.

³ In modern academic literature, after the changes, the name "Pomaks" is increasingly required, which will also be used in the article.

⁴ E. Ivanov, *Pomatsite spored balgarskata etnodemografska statistika*, Naselenie 2012, kn. 1–2, p. 163.

The author also published a reference from the Ministry of Interior in 1990 and 1991, according to which the population of Pomaks in the country as of June 1991 amounted to 257,270, distributed by districts, with the largest number in the Rhodope Mountains – Smolyan, Pazardzhik and Blagoevgrad, and in the Teteven balkan⁵.

2. Policy of the totalitarian state towards Pomaks in Bulgaria

The Ottoman Empire hosted a specific population, professing Islam and speaking Bulgarian, referred to by the name (and self-name) “Pomaks” and which enjoyed the status of “Muslims” – “Sunni”.

After the liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, a large part of this population remained within the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Rumelia, and after the Balkan Wars in 1912, Pomaks remained in Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Macedonia and Albania. The Bulgarian state repeatedly made violent attempts to assimilate them.

Immediately after the communist coup of 9 September 1944, the activities of the Pomak organization “Rodina” were denied and the Turkish names were restored. The state’s “favourable” attitude towards Pomaks continued until the second half of the 1940s, when a strategy was devised to “deal with the Mohammedan problem”. The process of monitoring and controlling Pomaks began almost immediately after the coup of 9 September 1944, it went through various stages and forms and lasted until 1989. The forced name change in 1972–1974 was only a stage in the process of total state and institutional control over this population (Иванова 2002; Пашова, Воденичаров 2011; Стоянов 1998; Груев 2008; Муратова 2012, 2021)⁶. The state

⁵ Blagoevgrad – 61,350, Burgas – 3,300, Varna – 23, Veliko Tarnovo – 1,786, Gabrovo – 7, Kardzhali– 32 700, Lovech – 7,800, Pazardzhik – 28,500, Plovdiv – 12,360, Razgrad – 2,974, Ruse – 865, Silistra – 934, Sliven– 20, Smolyan – 104,700, Stara Zagora – 4,000, Targovishte – 3,061, Haskovo – 3,000, Shumen – 1 543, Sofia – 150 (Ibidem, pp. 163–197).

⁶ E. Ivanova, *Othvarlenite “priobshteni”. Ili protsesa, narechen “vazroditelen” (1912–1989)*, Sofia 2002; A. Pashova, P. Vodenicharov, *“Vazroditelniya protses” i religioznata kriptoidentichnost na myusyulmani ot Blagoevgradski okrag. Izsledvaniya i dokumenti*, Sofia 2011; V. Stoyanov, *Turskoto naselenie v Balgariya mezhdu polyusite na etnicheskata palitra*, Sofia 1998; M. Gruev, A. Kalyonski, *Vazroditelniyat protses: Myusyulmanskite obshtnosti i komunisticheskiya rezhim*, Sofia 2008; N. Muratova, *Politiki na sotsialisticheskata vlast v Balgariya kam zhenite myusyulmanki*, [in:] *Da poznaem komunizma*, ed. I. Znepolski, Sofia 2012, pp. 319–370; eadem, *Zheni otvad arhiva. Nevidimite istorii na zhenite v Balgariya*, Blagoevgrad 2021.

used a wide range of repressions – direct – physical violence, exodus, discrimination and marginalization.

The chronology of the repression of Pomaks:

- Persecution of opposition-minded Pomaks during the elections – 1948, members of the Agricultural Party and other opposition unions;
- Forced, mass exodus of Pomaks from the border regions in the Rhodope Mountains to the interior of the country;
- In 1953, the state introduced new passports in which the Muslim religion was disregarded and Pomaks had to register either as Bulgarians or Macedonians;
- In 1958, the process of taking off the traditional clothing of Pomak women started and continued until 1989;
- Land was co-opted and confiscated – the establishment of the TKZS;
- In 1962, the process of assimilation of the Pomak population began with attempts to change their Turkish names to Bulgarian;
- Deportations and repression – prisons and camps for individuals who disagreed with the name change;
- In 1972, a new attempt to forcibly assimilate this population began;
- Bans on all religious rites and rituals – prayers in mosques, religious festivals, circumcisions;
- Destruction of graves and tombstones with Muslim names;
- The state introduced a new unified burial ritual that completely contradicted their religious one.

The penalties for adopting and maintaining religious practices were dismissal from work, expulsion from schools and universities, deportations within and outside the country, assassinations, camps and prisons, suicide. These continued until 1990 when they were given back their original names and religious freedom. Resistance to repression, related to the “revival” process, was usually criminalized and prosecuted under the Criminal Law.

This is how the heirs of Sofka Asenova Boyadzhieva from the village of Chavdar, Dospat municipality, simply explained the situation in a Pomak community (they reached the Central Commission but were denied rehabilitation): “We do not agree with the reasons for the refusal by the Regional Commission – Smolyan, because the “revival process” as part of the class – party upbringing was not just about name replacement in 1972. It lasted until 1989, with efforts aimed at replacing the clothing of the elderly, no circumcision and religious ordinances allowed. That is why we are convinced that our mother’s death was caused by political harassment by Yanka

Pavlova, a party secretary, during the “revival process”. On several occasions, she was publicly undressed and reprimanded. The culmination of these actions against her took place in August 1980, when her ferretje (!) and head cloth was taken off in a village shop. How would a woman 97 year old feel? As a result of her abuse, she decided to end her life and hanged herself on 17 August 1980. We would be sincerely grateful if you could issue a certificate of political rehabilitation to our mother”⁷.

3. Analysis of the rejected applications of Pomaks for recognition of political rehabilitation and compensation

Which groups of repressed people were not included in the Act from 1991 to 1996, when the applications of more than 80 percent of repressed people passed through the committees? An analysis of the rejected applications for political rehabilitation of Pomaks shows that they were tried and sent to prisons on criminal charges precisely in the years 1964⁸ and 1972–73⁹, when the state forcibly changed their Turkish names in its attempts to “Bulgarianize” them.

The Commission’s argument was that the articles on the virtue of which they were convicted, were not included in the Central Committee’s directions, the evidence was insufficient, or the witness accounts were inconsistent. This was the majority of the dismissed cases. A case in point was Mehmed Mustafov Isev, from the village of Ribnovo, who was sentenced to imprisonment under Article 205 of the Penal Code. The Regional Commission rejected the request on the grounds that this text was not included in the reference on persons entitled to compensation. A witness from the same village stated under oath: “I know that they convicted Mehmet

⁷ CSA, f. 1206, op. 1, a.e.15, l. 25–27.

⁸ SAB, f.1511, op. 1, a.e. 4: Ahmed Aliov Kungyov, l. 50, article 273 and 205 from the Penal code 1964; Ahmed Mustafa Vrachov, l. 54, article. 210, 253 and 205, 1964; Mehmed Musa Palov, l. 55, the same, 1964; Ahmed Asanov Ramadanov, l. 59, article 210, 1964; Mustafa Said Beg, l. 61, article 108, 144 and 162,1964 ; Ahmed Mehmedov Gurdalov, l. 72, article 205; Mustafa Salikov Ikov, l. 99, article 273 and 205, 1964;Ahmed Osman Ahmed, l. 100, article 205 1964; Ali Aliev Kiselov, l. 101, article 108 and 144, 1964.

⁹ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4: Dzhamal Mehmedov Sirachki, l.81, article 96, 1972; Mustafa Halil Bachevsk, l. 82, article 96, 1972; Sabri Mehmedov Buntsev, l. 97, article 96, 1972; Hyusein Ibrahim Vasalov, l. 97, article 96, 1972; Redzhep Ibrahimov Cholak, l. 106, article 96, 1972. 96 As a criminal, in September 1973 Yusein Mashev from Ribnovo was arrested and send to Belene concentration camp. That is way his application was also rejected. For his unusual story see Z. Zafer, *Sreshtu barrierite. Neobiknovenata istoriya na obiknoveniya Yusein Mashev*, Balkanistichen forum 2021, 3, pp. 11–32.

Isev and he went to prison. They tried him for not wanting to change his name. He went to prison together with 10 people, and maybe there were more, just for not wanting to change their names. That was during the first revival process in 1964”¹⁰.

Other people from Ribново were also convicted under this article¹¹.

The real victims of the two attempts to change names (1964 and 1972 and 1973) were convicted and sent to prisons with criminal offences attributed to them, despite the fact that Article 1/7/ explicitly stated that “Those repressed in connection with the forced change of names shall be entitled to political rehabilitation.” All those killed in public places, homes, yards, streets, squares and trying to escape across the border were not politically rehabilitated because the 1991 Law lacks a relevant provision. Thus, the applications of the relatives of many killed while trying to cross a border have been rejected. An application by Ayshe Ahmanova Imova that her son was politically repressed by murder in 1972 in connection with the “revival process” was also rejected. Her son Nuri Imamov attempted to cross the border and was shot¹².

The 1991 Act does not provide for political amnesty measures for the relatives of those who were killed, died or committed suicide in remand prisons or died recently after their release. Nor are there provisions for persons convicted on political grounds and killed in prisons, camps and in the custody of the Ministry of the Interior by its officers.

Similarly, there are no texts for the descendants of those killed during the “revival” process. Such is the case of Tefik Tefikov Hadzhiev from Breznitsa; a witness, Redzhep Shaban Groshar, born 1 April 1931 in the village of Breznitsa, said: “It was in 28 March 1973. A group of young people with Tefik Hadzhiev was shot at and Tefik fell. We travelled from Breznitsa to Kornitsa where some meeting was to be held by General Krum Radonov and we set out with that purpose. Later we heard another shot in which a woman was hit. The assembly was not held. We were dispersed. There were police dogs, horses, shooting. There were y killings after we returned to the village. It then became clear that the reason was because of people’s unwillingness to change their names”¹³.

¹⁰ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4, l. 51.

¹¹ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 5 – Ismail Ismailov Boshnakov, Mehmed Mustafov Adipov, Ahmed Ahmed Kadri, Mehmedali Amov Adipov, Dzhamal Ahmedov Mihin and many others.

¹² SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 8.

¹³ Ibidem, l. 11.

The Regional Commission rejected the request of the descendants on account of murder during the “revival” process. Decision: The RC, taking into account letter No. 71–54 of 20.10.1992 from the Ministry of the Interior and the witness’s explanations, considered that this case did not concern a conviction for political reasons, or a disappearance for political reasons, but rather a murder committed recklessly during a riot to disperse the population on the occasion of the change of names in 1973. The authorities aimed at dispersing the incoming groups rather than dislodging certain individuals according to their own preconceived political plan. Therefore, the Regional Commission rejected the request... **there was no political repression within the meaning of the Act**¹⁴.

Similar was the fate of Yusein Asanov Karaalilov, a 45-year-old father of 6 children¹⁵, killed on March 28 “during a raid carried out by Interior Ministry officers to restore public order”. The witnesses of the tragic event, Said Bekir Bialk from the village of Kornitsa, and Ibrahim Hyusein Sarmanli, also from Kornitsa: “I was wounded in this action in which Yusein was killed. I saw him in the morgue, he had been dead. He was shot 3 times. He died on the spot. Many of us headed to the square to see if they would baptize us. The shooting started at about 5 o’clock in the morning. The population was frightened. For three months we stood in the square, men, women, children. I was also in the square. Yusein, who was shot, was also in the square. The whole village was in the square. At 5 o’clock in the dark, on March 28, 1973, cars with volunteer militiamen, civilians from Gotse Delchev, brought armed people who started to shoot at people. I can’t explain what happened, I was wounded, they took me to the hospital in Gotse Delchev and there I saw Yusein dead [...] I was at home when the murder happened. When I heard gunshots, I jumped out of the house and went to the square. The fire brigade was pouring water on people, they didn’t want to change their names and were protesting. In this skirmish with the militia, 3 people were killed, there were also many wounded – and children”¹⁶.

Therefore, the decision of the Regional Commission sounds cynical and absurd: “It is evident from the submitted Certificate No. 54/94 of the Kornitsa Village Mayor’s Office and 53/94 of the Kornitsa Village Mayor’s Office that the petitioners are the heirs of the murdered Yusein Asanov Karaalilov. Certificate 54 indicates that he

¹⁴ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4, l. 64.

¹⁵ About the killing of Yusein Asanov Karaalilov, see the story of witness Zeynep Zafer (Z. Zafer, *Zavinagi izselena*, [in:] *Nasilie, politika i pamet. Komunisticheskiyat rezhim v Pirinska Makedoniya – refleksii na savremennika i izsledovatelya*, ed. M. Gruev, Sofiya 2011).

¹⁶ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 10, L. 88.

was killed in a name-changing operation with firearms, and the letter to the RCommission from the Armed Forces Prosecutor's Office establishes that Karaalilov died of a gunshot wound during the operation carried out by the Ministry of Interior officers to restore public order"¹⁷.

The letter also mentioned the number of the death certificate drawn up by the Municipal People's Council of Gotse Delchev. Having considered the evidence on file, the Commission considered that in this case there was neither a disappearance nor a conviction of death for political reasons. This case was not compensable under the Act. The Commission considered that Yusein Asanov Karalilov was not repressed for political reasons – he disappeared without a trace in 1973.

This is a part of Ibrahim Bekir Bialk's account of the "public order restoration campaign" itself: "So, with the fire brigade, they managed to take us back and then they fired a red rocket into the air to shoot at meat, and they started shooting. In the group where I was, there were many wounded. That's where they killed Ago Muarem – they killed him with a butt – they started wounding, people started screaming [...] I was in hospital, but right here in the community centre, when they got in and first installed the cameras (for photos) and started hitting us there, they hit me here in the left shoulder, a bastard with a tree hit me, and I was wounded in the left hand [...] They took us to the old militia in the town. And Sally Amidenwas at my feet. He died on the way, in Banichan. By that time, he was moaning, and then he stopped and died. That's where Ibraim Boshnakov said to that officer – Look, this guy's dying – Who's going to pay attention to you, and when we got down into town, he was dead. We jumped out of the militia car. There were a lot of injuries – I was injured in the arm, my brother in the shoulder, there were a lot of injuries to the legs"¹⁸.

The third case arouses, if nothing else, complete bewilderment, is how it is possible to interpret in this way a law that is supposed to restore and compensate for an injustice of a totalitarian regime. The application was lodged by Awa Mustafa Molaali, the wife of the victim, also from Kornica, and concerns the same events. Witness Said Bekir Bialk said: "In 1973, in connection with the revival process in the village of Kornitsa, the incident I want to tell you about occurred. The whole village was in the square, and at 5 o'clock on 28 March, armed people from Gotse Delchev came and seized him, took him to the community centre, and he was wounded and they threw him on the square in front of the community centre, kicked him. Finally, they

¹⁷ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e.10, l. 17.

¹⁸ S. Konedareva, *Gorchivi razkazi*, Blagoevgrad 2003, 6.

threw him in the car I was in, together with the other detainees. The car left packed with people, and he died on the way. It is not known where he is buried”¹⁹.

The Regional Commission rejected the claim that he disappeared in 1973 during the revival process. The RC considers that the case is one of disappearance without trace – the burial site of the deceased remains unknown but in the absence of a court decision establishing the death, the commission rejects the claim of the descendants²⁰.

The case of Sabri Isufov Zvezdyov is a bit different, because he was an elderly man at the time of the name change in 1965. Zia Mustafa Guja from Gorno Kraishte said about him: “Sabri Zvezdyov and I are from the same village. He was sued in 1965 in connection with the name change. He was a good man, but the authorities hated him because he was a believer. People respected him. He had authority in the village. He was against changing names. Together with others, they were called out and he was tried and sent to prison. After he came back, you could tell that he was abused – physically beaten, and he died in hospital from the abuse”²¹.

The Regional Commission did not recognize him as politically repressed.

In 2005, 14 years after the first version of the Law, new categories of people were included and subject to rehabilitation: individuals who died in the resistance movement; Bulgarian citizens of non-Bulgarian ethnic origin, sent to camps in the USSR after 1944; the illegally detained in the units of the Ministry of Interior and other places; the imprisoned in so called “labour-education hostels“, labour camps and other places of the type, and forced labour mobilization; “enemies of the people“ deprived of the right to a pension; “former people” and their descendants not allowed to study at universities; people with university education released from work and forced to work on construction sites, in the cleaning industry or in agriculture. These amendments – 14 years after the original version of the act, show its loopholes and imperfections.

In spite of the numerous amendments and additions to the Act in the following years, what has never been brought to the National Assembly and put up for discussion is the repression of the Pomak population related to their religious practices: circumcisions, funerals, prayers and celebration of Bayrami. The Act states very incorrectly in Article 1, paragraph 7: “*Repressed in connection with the forced change of*

¹⁹ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 7. The case is also covered by Ibrahim Bekir Byalk (S. Конедарева *Gorchivi razkazi*, p. 6).

²⁰ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 7, l. 8.

²¹ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 12, l. 20.

names". These religious practices were fully criminalized by the communist criminal law and do not allow for political or civil rehabilitation.

It is evident from the practice of the Act that the same crimes after 1984 are recognized as political repression but not before that date, although Article 1 of the Act explicitly says: "[...] *unlawfully repressed because of their origin, political convictions or religious beliefs during the period from 9 September 1944 to 10 November 1989*".

By what logic were circumcisions not considered political repression until 1984 and then accepted? There are numerous cases where mothers who circumcised their children before 1984 were convicted and imprisoned²². According to Zeynep Zafer, in 1985–1986, in Sliven town women's prison the highest number of women were convicted of circumcision of their children or grandchildren, which is essentially a political repression²³. In the absence of male specialists, two women from the municipality of Belitsa, began circumcising children and were convicted for body injury²⁴.

In the village of Lazhnitsa, for example, the following people were convicted and served actual sentences of up to one year for circumcision of their children (due to the absurdity of the Act, none of them submitted documents for political rehabilitation): 1. Moharem A. Boshnak – convicted, served 1 year; 2. Usein R. Mollov 1 year too; 3. Bayryamka S. Karpacheva – 6 months; 4. Atike S. Kurta – 6 months; 5. Sanie I. Karpacheva – 6 months; 6. Alife M. Hadzhieva – 6 months; 7. Pembe A. Boshnak – 6 months; 8. Fatme F. Shikirova – 6 months²⁵.

Here are some of their stories: "In the morning, as they left home for the kindergarten, the party secretary, the proxy, the employees, were on duty in the streets. They took off the boy's pants to see if they were circumcised. When they arrived at the school and the kindergarten, all the teachers were obliged by the Municipal Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and personally by the secretary, to stop the male children and check if they had been circumcised. Many of them were

²² SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 3: Nedzhibe Reshitova Nemchova, l. 127; Eltine Halilova Parzhulova, l. 166; Batie Mehmedova Meyzineva. F. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4: Ayshe Ahmed Santurova, l. 49; Fatma Asimova Topova, l. 60; Fatme Mustafa Kadri, l. 102, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 5: Asine Alilova Chobanova, l. 1; Violeta Albenova Karova, l. 7; Atidzhe Redzhepova Molaademova, l. 135.

²³ Z. Zafer, *Bulgaristan'da Zorunlu Asimilasyona Karşı Mücadele ve Kadın*, International Journal of Social Sciences 2018, 2/2, p. 7.

²⁴ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 3, l. 7.

²⁵ U.H. Karpach, *Istoriya za razvitiето na Lazhnitsa*, Blagoevgrad 2012.

accustomed to taking off their pants in the street and the proxy, the party secretary, some teachers looking for signs of circumcision. Male children under the age of 15 were on report. Daily inspections of the houses were carried out and reported in person to the municipal committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The mother or the father of the exposed circumcised children were immediately on trial. The very next day, a case was opened. If it was the father of the circumcised child, he was sentenced to 1 year in prison, if it was the mother – she spent 6 months in the Sliven prison. The very next day, they were arrested and taken to jail”²⁶.

Here are two stories about how women survived their convictions and imprisonment for the “criminal offense” of circumcising their children: “Well, what happened – I circumcised the kid, I made the decisions, even to go to prison, I was fully determined. I’m not leaving my grandchild uncircumcised, I’m a Muslim –all of us here, the whole family is Muslim. And I went, I set myself up, I found a man to circumcise my baby. [...] They called me, interrogated me in Satovcha, interrogated me in the militia. That’s where I told them everything. There was another woman here with me, she peed with fear, but I’m not afraid, why should I be scared. I have not slaughtered, I have not stolen, I have not killed. [...] And they started judging me, and my husband was very scared. I told him not to be scared, people go to jail, I gave him courage. [...] In prison it was hard, my stomach hurts because they put pork in the food, and I didn’t eat. [...] In prison every morning, when I saw the sun, I would say “Sunshine, sunshine, do you see my family somewhere” /she starts crying/. And to this day, I have not seen any conviction. They didn’t give us anything like that. And my young people were punished, they have pushed them all over the place, because I’ve circumcised the kid, that I’m a criminal of the state. The wife of my brother also circumcised their child, and they took their fields of soy, tobacco, to die, to die – they were pushed out, the young, from everywhere”²⁷.

“Well, it was a difficult experience for me – I was judged in Gotse Delchev, we went to Blagoevgrad, then we appealed in Sofia. I was judged for murder. And I was sued for circumcision of the child. We tell them that it’s hygienic, that we do it for religious reasons. But they didn’t understand, they were just looking to torturing us. To get to prison, to intimidate people. We went to jail with a woman from our village. [...] And there was nothing we could do, I went to jail and served eight months, and that’s it. But it was a difficult experience, I would cry, separated from the family.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

²⁷ S. Konedareva, *Gorchivi razkazi*, Blagoevgrad 2003, p. 16.

How would you feel if you didn't feel guilty of being taken to jail – you didn't kill, you didn't steal anything. I don't remember it, but it was murder: we tried to kill our kids. We've been through a lot of penalties and I haven't felt healthy since. More and more hospitals... After 1989, we were paid nothing as repressed, we went to Sliven to say how many months we were there. They gave the notes there, but they didn't pay us nothing"²⁸.

There were men convicted for the same ritual circumcision of their children²⁹ and those who performed the rite of circumcision themselves³⁰. If this happened before 1984, they were not rehabilitated, either.

Interesting is the case of Ali Abdulov Mehmedov³¹, an imam who performed the rite of circumcision by obligation. He was also denied political rehabilitation with the following reasoning: "It is clear from the presented criminal record no. 2224 and certificate No. 6611/26.10.93 of the Ministry of Justice that Ali Abdulov Mehmedov, who died on 13 Nov. 1994, as evidenced by certificate no. 654/20.11.95 by Gotse Delchev municipality, was condemned in 1988 under Art. 324. For the convicted, it is necessary to establish that this happened, the condemnation in connection with the change of the names of the Bulgarian citizens. In 1987, Ali Mehmedov was convicted under Article 324(1) of the Court of Justice, subparagraph 2, for the pursuit of a prohibited activity and was not entitled to pursue it. The fact that the witnesses mentioned the co-ordination of the event for which he was convicted and the revival process for changing the names does not give reason for the Commission to consider the conviction to have been in relation to the revival process, as required by the law.

Witness Zlatko Georgiev Shomov from Gotse Delchev's account: "Ali Mehmedov and I are neighbours. He was constantly persecuted, beaten and ill-treated by representatives of the then authorities. My family and I applied onion to the bruises from the beating. He performed the circumcisions as an imam. He was also actively involved in the protests against the name changes, insisting that the names remained of Turkish origin. I think with the condemnation, they were trying to remove him from the village so that he wouldn't influence the rest of the people. I know Ali went

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 22–23.

²⁹ SAB, 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4 – Сабри Хасан Хъйрола, l. 51; Мустафа Али Хъйрола, l. 53 and f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 9.

³⁰ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 5 – Хюсеин Дауд Киневир, l. 117 and f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 9, l. 5, Магда Милева, l. 5.

³¹ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4, l. 38–39.

to prison for circumcising children. I know he was tried for the same thing before. He did it because his religion required it and he didn't care about the laws"³².

Another witness, Zainil Abdulov Abdulov, from G. Delchev, confirmed what the other witness' words and added: "I know Ali went to jail for circumcising children. I know he was sued for the same thing before. He did it because religion demands it, and that's why he didn't care about the laws. I was a witness when they were conducting a search for literature and materials indicating pro-Turkish activity"³³.

What makes an impression by comparing the statements of the witnesses and the Commission's decision is "the simultaneousness of the event". It is clear that this is about circumcision and name change. Both were only some forms of repression towards Muslims and in this sense were a part of the "revival process". The law declares the rehabilitation of persons "illegally repressed because of their origin, political beliefs or religious beliefs in 12.09.1944–10.11.1989". The chairwoman of the Regional Commission, mayor of Blagoevgrad, Eli Maseva, a lawyer, pretends not to know that circumcision is a part of religious practices in Islam. Moreover, the Regulations of the Act recognize the cases of circumcision as a political repression after 1994, and the imam was condemned in 1988.

What is the reason behind this pseudo-law that allows lawmakers and its contractors simply to cover up the crimes of the totalitarian state, so a person like Ali Ahmedov, an imam and highly religious man who maintained his religion despite brutal repression, and cannot receive political and civil rehabilitation?

Another problem is the number of cases of the repressed from the Blagoevgrad region, not recognized as politically repressed, and who turned to the Central Commission, unhappy with the decisions of the Regional one? Fund 1511 of the Blagoevgrad state archive contains 32 cases, examined by the Central Commission and sent back. Of these, 9 are of Pomaks, and all the applications for recognition of repression confirmed the decisions of the Regional Commission, and were rejected. I will consider only two of them, concerning the most serious crime, murder, which shows very well the obstacles encountered by the repressed or their relatives due to the viciousness of the Act and the Ordinance.

One of the cases is Mehmed Yusmenov Kaleev from Slashten³⁴. The decision of the Central Commission No. 1040 establishes the following: "It is apparent from the evidence gathered in the file that the person, Mehmed Kaleev, was killed on 27.08, 1972,

³² SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4, l. 52.

³³ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 4, l. 54.

³⁴ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 580, l. 1–16.

at 11:45 p.m., 3 kilometers south of Slashten. Such a hypothesis is not provided for the Law and there is no legal basis for satisfying the claims of the descendants for recognition of Kaleev's political repression"³⁵.

The Central commission confirms the decision of the Regional Commission Blagoevgrad and rejected the request of the descendants. The case is also attached to the decision of the Regional Commission and the reasons therein: "They present a letter No. 986/04.06.1993 of the administrative authority, from which it was established that the slain Mehmed Kaleev was killed with another person on 27 August 1972, south of Slashten, in defiance. The Commission considers that that document is not sufficient to consider that the applicant's son went missing on that date"³⁶.

The request of the father of the slain boy explicitly states "[...] My son was killed during the name change in the village of Slashten. Then border troops staged a breach of the border, and in fact my son was taken from the village with others and killed at the border, as many people had fled abroad because of the name change"³⁷.

As early as in 1992, the parents also applied to Captain Boyan Toshev, the military prosecutor in the Sofia Military District Prosecutor's Office, asking for preliminary proceedings to be opened in connection with the death of their son. The reply arrives as an official letter (a decree) of refusing to initiate preliminary proceedings – city of Sofia, 20.07. 1992. The Decree provides the following personal response from Captain Boyan Toshev: "From the inspection carried out of file No. 420/92, it was found that Petty Officer Bekyarov, an employee at that time in the commendation of the town of Slashten, had died, and Petty Officer Ivanchev, according to information from the commander of Unit 56570, had moved to the city of Plovdiv to an unknown address. Summoned to the prosecutor's office, Mr. Usain Shirov said that on the night the two boys were killed, he was in his home. At this stage, the military prosecutor's office has no other information about the case. You should refer your claim to the Ministry of Interior and the State Military Archives – The City of Veliko Tarnovo [...] I refuse to initiate preliminary proceedings of this case [...]"³⁸. Followed by a stamp of the Military Prosecutor's Office in Sofia and the prosecutor's handwritten signature.

The transfer of the case between the institutions shows precisely what the relatives of the repressed were subjected to. The other case of murder that reached

³⁵ Ibidem, l. 1.

³⁶ Ibidem, l. 2.

³⁷ Ibidem, l. 3.

³⁸ Ibidem, l. 6.

the Central Commission and was dismissed, is the case of Mehmed Yusufov Dodumov³⁹. The decision of the Central Commission bears No.1039/12.11.1996: “From the evidence gathered in the file, Mehmed Yusufov Dodumov, born on 17 Dec. 1947, was killed in the Labour Educational Dormitory (prison) “Kutsiyan” – Pernik. Such a hypothesis is not provided by the Central commission which confirms the Regional Commission’s decision not to grant rehabilitation”⁴⁰.

The decision of the Regional Commission is attached: “The descendants present a death certificate, which shows that Mehmed died in “Kotsian”, but death as a result of this type of repression does not provide grounds for compensation. In the declarations, the interviewed witnesses said that Dudumov had died in the camp, but this was not enough to justify the claim for compensation for his relatives”⁴¹.

Here’s what the witnesses said: “I knew Mehmed. He was taken from the village and taken to a camp, and after 2–3 months we learned that he had died. From other persons – Mehmed Mustafov Kamberov, Resim Mustafov Uruchev, who were with him in the camp and said that he had died of beating and starvation in the camp, in the snow. He didn’t die of natural causes, he died of beating”⁴².

The language of the documents from the Central and Regional Commission also makes a strong impression. The right, and the request for political and civil rehabilitation, has been replaced by a “claim damages”, “searching for benefits” as if they could replace the suffering for the murdered victims of communist terror.

In lieu of conclusion

As early as in 1993, when the Act came into force, the Union of Repressed Persons in Bulgaria began to protest against the gaps and imperfections of the Act, and reacted particularly strongly to Decree 249 of the Council of Ministers of 09.12.1992 (promulgated in the State Gazette, No. 102 of 18.12.1992), which imposed restrictions that were not in the PCRRPA. Despite the protests, no measures were taken until 28 June 2004, when the Act came into force again.

The Ordinance in question regulates a bizarre “social” equivalence in complete contravention of the Act. It proposes a limitation: individuals imprisoned in totalitarian Bulgaria to be recognized for compensation for only 33 months and 10 days,

³⁹ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 581, l. 1–11.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, l. 1.

⁴¹ Ibidem, l. 2.

⁴² Ibidem.

regardless of how long they spent in prisons and camps. It states that the victim of several repressions (deportation, exclusion and imprisonment) can choose only one of them. Everyone should be entitled to compensation for the entire period of repression. Moreover, the compensation is symbolic, an expression of hypocrisy rather than respect and justice. One month in the camps in Belene and Lovech was valued at 64 leva – almost 7 times less than the minimum wage in the country.

The very name (Political and Civil Rehabilitation of Repressed Persons Act) is also incorrect, as it implies only some repressed persons, not all. It would be correct to say “the repressed persons”.

Despite the fact that since 2011, the Commissions had not been active, in 2016 a draft Act on Amendment and Supplementation of the Political and Civil Rehabilitation of Repressed Persons Act was submitted to the National Assembly by Metodi Andreev, an MP, and a group of MPs. Their reasoning was that the Act was imperfect and unfair. First of all, the existence of a statute of limitations, which violates Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Ironically, the Act has not been formally repealed, but its operation has been virtually suspended since 31 December 2011, the day when the last limitation period for lodging claims for repressed persons expired.

The Ordinance to the Act puts victims in the position of seeking proof of innocence from the same repressive authorities that persecuted and killed them. Very often the victims are denied access to the documents, another act of repression.

The communist regime would make arrests around specific events: the defeat of the opposition, the Hungarian events, the attempt to change the names of 1964 and 1972–3, to apply the Criminal Law.

A case in point is a case presented in a testimony of given by Krum Spasov Nevrokopski⁴³ before the Regional Commission in Blagoevgrad, regarding the request for political rehabilitation of Hristo Manasiev – a criminal prisoner from Belene. Fortunately, this case ends in rehabilitation due to the high position of the witness. However, dozens of active participants in the events of the name change did not receive political rehabilitation: “First of all, I would like to express an opinion that applies to the whole country. I am even surprised that such a man as Hristo Manasiev can be presented to you, with a document that he was brought to the camp in Belene for criminal reasons. If he hadn’t been in the camp at the time, you wouldn’t be talk-

⁴³ Krum Spasov Nevrokopski – political prisoner from Belene, participant in the Hungarian events, an MP from the Grand National Assembly, and chairman of the Union of the repressed persons.

ing to me now. Look at the absurdity of it today. With a document from the police, using data from 1956, 57, 58-years, in the most difficult years for the opposition and during the Hungarian events, it is only natural that this man, uncomfortable with the authorities, was declared a criminal and now you want to convince us of the same. And you have to accept that it's criminal just because you've been presented with such a document. You have the power to refute this. In this particular case, I say that he was not sent to the camp for criminal reasons. We also argued on this issue in the National Assembly. I was in Belene for political reasons. I was arrested by the Court of Justice around the Hungarian Events of 1956 and 1957 and was sent to Belene. I got there with Hristo Manasiev. We were a special unit – most dangerous, and he was our commander. There were about 350–400 of us on special regime. He was in the watchmakers' group [...] I claim and maintain my declaration that he was not a criminal”⁴⁴.

The burden of proving entitlement to compensation is on the repressed person or his or her legal descendants. The problem is that the documents are issued by state bodies – courts, town halls, the Ministry of the Interior, state archives, etc., which are served by officials of the state, before which the right granted by the law must be proved.

The number of unsuccessful claims due to “missing” official documents certifying entitlement to compensation is quite big as is the group of people who opt out because of the cumbersomeness of the procedure. There are also many victims of the totalitarian regime, who, seeing the vicious way the procedure works, do not apply for rehabilitation at all.

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⁴⁴ SAB, f. 1511, op. 1, a.e. 581, l. 16.

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